

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 328 923

CS 507 093

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TITLE Changes in Images of Adolescents on Television:
Sibling Interaction on Family Sitcoms in the 50's and
the 80's.
PUB DATE 6 Apr 90
NOTE 27p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Central States Speech Association (Detroit, MI, April
5-8, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; Comparative Analysis; Content
Analysis; Family Life; *Sibling Relationship;
*Television; Television Research
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Behavior; Family Communication;
*Situation Comedies; Television History

ABSTRACT

A study examined the interactions of siblings in television families in three popular sitcoms of the 1950s--"Father Knows Best," "Leave it To Beaver," and "Ozzie and Harriet." Nine episodes of each sitcom were videotaped, and the behaviors were coded using a system developed to code sibling behavior in 1980s sitcoms. Comparison of sibling behavior in the 1950s and the 1980s indicated: (1) the frequency of positive behaviors between fifties siblings was significantly greater than the frequency of positive behaviors between eighties siblings; however, (2) fifties siblings were limited in the functions they performed for each other; and (3) fifties siblings appeared to interact less with their siblings than eighties siblings did. (Three tables of data are included; 23 references are included.) (RS)

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Changes in Images of Adolescents on Television:
Sibling Interaction on Family Sitcoms in the
50's and the 80's

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A paper presented at the annual meeting of the Central
States Communication Association, Detroit Michigan, April 6,
1990.

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Abstract

The interactions of siblings in television families in three popular sitcoms of the 1950s, Father Knows Best, Leave it to Beaver, and Ozzie and Harriet, were compared to the interactions of television siblings in three popular 1980s sitcoms. The frequency of positive behaviors between fifties siblings was significantly greater than the frequency of positive behaviors between eighties siblings. However, fifties siblings were limited in the functions they performed for each other. They also appeared, in general, to interact less with their siblings than eighties siblings did.

Changes in Images of Adolescents on Television:

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50s and the 80s

Marsha Norman, writing in Ms. notes that one of the results of the dual-worker family is that when kids get home from school and are waiting for Mom to come home, they are watching reruns of fifties sitcoms such as Leave it to Beaver and Father Knows Best. She maintains that as kids contrast the images of fifties families with life in their own families, they feel cheated (1987). Kids may well feel equally cheated when watching first-run family sitcoms. Many media critics suggest that current family sitcoms are very similar to fifties sitcoms, rooted in the same values. Some even refer to The Cosby Show as the Father Knows Best of the eighties (Miller, 1986). Others, however, note substantive differences. Indeed, dads of the eighties television families have been through anti-war demonstrations, the women's movement and Watergate, and, in contrast to fifties television dads, realize that they do not have all the answers (Ardinger & Estrin, 1986). At the same time, because of afternoon syndication, in many markets

both fifties and eighties television families are readily available to viewers. What are the similarities and differences, if any?

Purpose and Questions

The study reported here examined sibling interactions in three television family sitcoms of the fifties and compared them to sibling interactions in three television families of the eighties. Specifically, 2157 sibling interactions were analyzed with regard to conflict and the functions performed by siblings. The study grew out of an earlier study of sibling interaction in television families of the eighties (Larson, 1989).

The specific research questions for study were:

1. Are the sibling behaviors in television families of the fifties different from those of the eighties, and if so are the differences primarily positive or negative?
2. Are there differences in the functions performed by television siblings of the fifties compared to those of the eighties?

3. With regard to dyad types (e.g., same-gender sibling dyads compared to mixed-gender dyads), are the patterns of positive and negative behaviors different in fifties siblings compared to eighties siblings?

Related Research

This study, as well as the earlier one dealing with television family siblings (Larson, 1989), is grounded in social learning theory which claims that television offers powerful role models for behavior. Prior research substantiates this claim (e.g., Chesebro, 1987; Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Watkins, 1985), and several are specifically related to models provided for family behavior (e.g., Brothers, 1989; Glennon & Butsch, 1982; Kalter, 1988).

The interaction between siblings was the focus of this for study for two main reasons. The sibling relationship is of particular interest because it is likely to be the longest-lived interpersonal relationship any of us will have, as it predates spousal and offspring relationships and endures past parental relationships. Second, sibling

relationships serve as the prototype for other interpersonal relationships (Schvaneveldt and Ihinger, 1979).

Despite the importance of sibling interaction, there is very little research available concerning the sibling relationship. One topic of interest has been the impact of birth order on such things as personality development (e.g., Kammeyer, 1967; Schvaneveldt & Ihinger, 1979) and sibling rivalry (e.g., Galvin & Brommel, 1982). Other research has focused on the effect of such atypical variables as serious illnesses or handicaps on sibling and family relationships (e.g., Grossman, 1972; Newman, 1966). Other research issues include the relationship between conflict and sibling gender (Irish, 1964; Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1970) and conflict and birth order (Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg).

The examination of sibling interaction in television families is even more scarce and mainly limited to programming of the seventies. For example, two studies of family roles portrayed during the 1975-76 season concern siblings, although one set of researchers noted that the siblings were primarily older teenagers or adult children (Greenberg, Hines, Buerkel-Rothfuss, and Atkin, 1980). One

of those studies (Greenberg et al.) concluded that the majority of the behaviors between siblings portrayed in the television families were positive (86.7%). Greenberg and Neuendorf (1980) studied siblings in black families on television during the 1975-76 season and found that they were primarily positive also (73.5%), although they exhibited more conflict than white siblings.

Bank and Kahn (1975) provide an intriguing and useful model which focuses on four sibling functions:

- 1.) identification and differentiation, in which siblings see themselves reflected in each other and/or reject the traits of a sibling. Siblings often learn vicariously through each other's experiences and emulate behavior of a sibling, for example.
- 2.) mutual regulation, in which they try out new ideas and roles and get feedback. Criticism by a sibling is an example of regulation.
- 3.) direct services, in which bargaining for goods or favors occurs. A sibling may protect a weak or young sibling from bullies in exchange for assistance with

household chores, for example. Giving and receiving information are also direct services.

4.) dealing with parents. Siblings often help each other solve problems or make excuses for each other to avoid trouble with parents.

A study of primarily adolescent and pre-adolescent siblings on three popular family sitcoms during the 1986-87 season (Larson, 1989), concluded that only 58.1% of sibling behaviors were positive. Additionally, sibling functions were studied by Larson. Although Bank and Kahn note the importance of siblings in the creation of self identity, very few of the behaviors observed by Larson were of the identification function (6.1%). In addition, the regulatory responses of siblings were primarily negative and critical (81.1%) rather than supportive responses. Conversely, according to Bank and Kahn (1975), birth siblings try to offer regulation in a tactful, face-saving manner, preferring not to embarrass a sibling. The direct services function (negotiating for favors, obtaining information) was performed mainly in positive ways (73.9%), according to Larson. A sibling function which was virtually non-existent

among television siblings was that of dealing with parents (1.8%). In extant families siblings often work together to avoid punishment from parents, or to teach younger siblings how to maintain good relations with parents.

Procedures and Method

For the purpose of this study, three 1950s family sitcoms were selected for analysis: Father Knows Best (first-run network programming from 1954-62); Leave it to Beaver (1957-63); and Ozzie and Harriet (1952-66). All three of these programs were popular, had long runs, featured siblings and are currently seen in syndication.

Nine episodes of each program were taped during December 1988. The episodes were not run in the original chronological order, so, for example, the various episodes of Ozzie and Harriet featured David and Ricky Nelson as preadolescents as well as college students. Analysis of the various episodes of fifties programs generated 803 sibling behaviors for analysis.

The behaviors were coded using the system developed by Larson (1989) to code sibling behaviors in family sitcoms of

the eighties. A behavior referred to any communication behavior, either verbal or nonverbal, directed toward a sibling. The receiver may or may not have been aware of the communication behavior. For example, a derogatory gesture intended for a sibling, but not noticed, would be coded as a behavior. A change in sender, receiver, direction (positive or negative), or function of the communication behavior indicated a new behavior. As a result, a rather long statement by a single character could hypothetically contain two or more communication behaviors.

Each behavior was identified by dyad. There were 10 such dyads identified by initiator/recipient of behaviors.

Behaviors were then identified as either positive or negative in direction. Positive behaviors were those which did not produce conflict. They were generally supportive behaviors. Negative behaviors were those that created conflict. They were generally hostile in tone. A neutral category was not used. The question, "Does the behavior result in conflict?" was the final criterion for determining whether behavior was positive or negative. Thus, phatic

communication was coded as positive, since it did not produce conflict.

The function of each communication behavior was categorized using a system based on the model of Bank and Kahn (1975). Identification: identifying oneself with the traits of a sibling, attempting to emulate a sibling's behavior; Differentiation: distancing oneself from a sibling; Regulation: getting or giving feedback about new ideas, roles or behaviors; Direct services: bartering for favors, giving or receiving information; Dealing with parents: working together to avoid parental punishment, teaching a sibling how to negotiate with parents.

Using Holsti's formula inter-coder reliability coefficients between the primary coder and two others was 1.0 for coding dyad, .95 for coding direction, and .95 for coding function (Wimmer and Dominick, 1987).

Results

Direction of Behaviors

With regard to direction of behaviors in programs overall, significantly more behaviors between siblings were

positive (74.2%) than negative (25.8%) $\chi^2(1, N = 803) = 187.48, p < .01$. Interestingly, chi square analysis indicated statistically significant differences between programs (see Table 1) with regard to positive and negative behaviors, $\chi^2(2, N = 803) = 51.98, p < .001$. While in both Father Knows Best and Ozzie and Harriet there was significantly more positive behavior than negative, the sibling behavior in Leave it to Beaver was far more positive (85.6%) than in either of the other programs.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Function and Direction of Behavior

The differentiation function did not occur on any of the programs, and was thus eliminated from chi square analysis. Analysis of the remaining functions (See Table 2) indicated that the direct services function occurred most frequently (66.4%). Moreover, in all three programs significantly more of this behavior was positive than was

negative. For example, Wally spent time drilling Beaver on his spelling words before the test in school.

Insert Table 2 About Here

The function which occurred next most frequently was regulation, and significantly more regulatory behavior was negative than positive on all three programs. When siblings sought feedback, what they received was negative. When Bud teased Betty about her upcoming blind date she threatened, "Don't you dare open your big mouth!"

Very few of the sibling behaviors were related to identification or dealing with parents, and all of it that did occur was on Leave it to Beaver. With regard to identification (See Table 2) the plotline of a number of episodes revolved around the Beaver's desire to learn how to be a teenager from his brother Wally. The Beaver paid particularly close attention to the manner in which Wally grappled with the challenge of heading up the "blind date committee," for example. Similarly, all of the sibling

behavior which concerned how to deal with parents occurred on Leave it to Beaver. While building a chincilla cage in the garage, for example, the boys punctured a tire on Dad's car and the episode revolved around the problem of surreptitiously getting it repaired to avoid trouble with their dad.

Mixed-gender and Same-gender Dyads

With regard to differences between mixed-gender versus same-gender dyads, significantly more negative behavior occurred in mixed-gender dyads $\chi^2 (1, N = 803) = 10.68, p < .01$. Of that negative behavior, most of it was from Bud, the brother in Father Knows Best, to his older sister. It is also of interest that proportionately more negative behavior occurred between sisters compared to that between brothers (see Table 3).

Discussion

There are several important conclusions to be drawn from these results. First, the interactions between siblings in fifties television families were significantly more positive than negative. On average, 74.2% of all

sibling behaviors was positive. Further, significantly more behaviors between fifties siblings were positive than between eighties television siblings $\chi^2 (1, N = 2157) = 55.98, p < .001$. There are several possible explanations for this phenomenon. It is possible that actual sibling relationships have evolved into more negative ones and that eighties portrayals are accurate for the times. Or, it is possible that the fifties television portrayals were erroneous, saccharine versions of the relationships of birth siblings of that time, and that eighties portrayals were simply more honest. Another plausible explanation is that current writers believe that viewers will find hostile portrayals of siblings relationships more interesting to viewers, garnering a larger share of the viewing audience.

Second, it is also apparent that the functions performed by siblings in fifties television families were remarkably limited. They mainly provided regulation and direct services to each other. Those siblings provided significantly less identification and differentiation behaviors than did eighties television siblings $\chi^2 (4, N = 2157) = 23.77, p < .01$. In fact, as noted earlier, Wally

and Beaver Cleaver were the only siblings who did perform this function for each other. The siblings on Father Knows Best and Ozzie and Harriet only functioned as providers of direct services and regulation. It is rather surprising that Ricky Nelson, on Ozzie and Harriet, did not use his older brother, David, as a model for anticipatory socialization, for example. Similarly, it is surprising that Kitten, the younger sister on Father Knows Best did not mimic the behavior of her older sister Betty. Further, with the exception of Wally and Beaver Cleaver, siblings in fifties television families rarely worked together to deal with parents. Perhaps this is a reflection of the temper of the times, in which assertiveness on the part of children in the family power structure was limited to their participation in "family councils." However, it should be noted that this function of dealing with parents was also virtually absent from sibling behavior on eighties sitcoms.

It is difficult to make meaningful comparisons between same-gender and mixed-gender dyads in fifties and eighties television siblings because there were only two mixed-gender dyads in the fifties families. However, while in the

eighties dyads younger sisters were more hostile to older brothers, in the fifties dyads there was more hostile behavior from the younger brother directed toward the older sister.

Another important observation is that although the sample sizes were the same for both studies (nine episodes of each of three programs), there were many more siblings and sibling behaviors in the eighties sitcoms. There were only 59.6% as many fifties sibling behaviors as there were eighties sibling behaviors. The communication behavior of the fifties television families appeared to be primarily between parent and child, rather than between siblings. Perhaps the television behaviors are merely reflections of real behavior in families which were less child-oriented than families are currently. It may reflect the interest of writers or the perceived interest of viewers primarily in behaviors between parents and children or between adults.

Thus, there are several significant differences between the portrayals of the sibling relationship in television families during the fifties and the eighties. The fifties siblings were more positive and supportive in their

behaviors. Further, the functions performed by fifties television siblings were more limited than those of eighties television siblings. Also, the children in families appeared to be more oriented to their parents rather than to their siblings.

This study is important in that it provides quantitative data which offers perspective on the evolution of the image of television siblings. While assertions are widespread about the images of life on television in the fifties, concrete descriptions have not been available. Further, the image of siblings is described not only in terms of positive and negative behavior, but also in terms of the functions television siblings perform for each other.

It appears that there may well be a gap not only between what children see on late afternoon reruns and what they observe about their own families. There may be an equally great gap between what children see on late afternoon family sitcoms and what they see in prime time.

Table 1

Direction of Sibling Behaviors

Program	Positive			Negative		
	N	%	χ^2	N	%	χ^2
<u>Father Knows Best</u>	120	62.2	3.77	73	37.8	10.86
<u>Leave it to Beaver</u>	334	85.6	6.85	56	14.4	19.73
<u>Ozzie and Harriet</u>	142	64.6	2.78	78	35.5	7.99

χ^2 (2, N = 803) = 51.98, p < .001

Table 2

Frequency of Behavior by Function and Direction

Function	Positive			Negative		
	N	%	χ^2	N	%	χ^2
<u>All Programs</u> ^u						
Direct Services	515	96.6	36.04	18	3.4	103.76
Regulation	51	21.8	86.65	183	78.2	249.49
Identification	21	100.0	1.88	--	--	5.41
Deal with Parents	9	60.0	.41	6	40.0	1.18
<u>Father Knows Best</u> ^v						
Direct Services	113	95.8	21.37	5	4.2	34.67
Regulation	7	9.3	33.20	68	90.7	55.72
Identification	--	--	--	--	--	--
Deal with Parents	--	--	--	--	--	--
<u>Leave it to Beaver</u> ^c						
Direct Services	289	97.0	4.47	9	3.0	26.68
Regulation	15	26.8	22.65	41	73.2	135.09
Identification	21	100.0	0.51	--	--	3.02
Deal with Parents	9	60.0	1.15	6	40.0	6.87

Table 2 (continued)

Frequency of Behavior by Function and Direction

Function	Positive			Negative		
	<u>N</u>	%	χ^2	<u>N</u>	%	χ^2
<u>Ozzie and Harriet</u> ^d						
Direct Services	113	96.6	18.13	4	3.4	32.99
Regulation	29	28.2	20.59	74	71.8	37.51
Identification	--	--	--	--	--	--
Deal with Parents	--	--	--	--	--	--

a χ^2 (3, N = 803) = 484.83, $p < .001$

b χ^2 (1, N = 193) = 144.96, $p < .001$

c χ^2 (3, N = 390) = 200.44, $p < .001$

d χ^2 (1, N = 220) = 109.22, $p < .001$

Table 3

Frequency of Behavior by Direction in Mixed-gender and
Same-gender Dyads

Dyad Composition	Direction					
	Positive			Negative		
	N	%	χ^2	N	%	χ^2
Brother/Sister	41	56.2	3.13	32	43.8	8.89
Sister/Brother	48	69.6	.18	21	30.4	.50
Sister/Sister	31	60.8	1.29	20	39.2	3.77
Brother/Brother	476	78.0	1.17	134	22.0	3.37

$$\chi^2 (3, N = 803) = 22.3, p < .01$$

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